

# Natyasastra Tradition and the Theatre of K. N. Panikkar

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Natyasastra, though formulated two thousand years ago, is not a frozen text; but a living tradition.<sup>1</sup> Theatrical practices based on it have undergone manifold changes. The first part of this paper traces the history of evolution of that tradition. The second part attempts to fix the theatre of Sri. Kavalam Narayana Panikkar<sup>2</sup>, especially his Sanskrit plays, in a historical context in that tradition.

### 1

We have at least twenty five hundred years of history for our theatre. Theatre was very much popular even before Bharata. The Jataka tales and several textual references provide the cue to the pre-Bharata practices, which were in a crude form at that time. Bharata refined them, like Panini who prescribed a grammar to cull out the refined language of Sanskrit from the various local dialects. In the same way, Bharata pulled out a sophisticated theatre from the acting practices prevailed around him. He employed three techniques to distance his new theatre from the popular practices – he shifted the performances from the streets to the closely-guarded theatre-houses, introduced a stylised mode of acting and bestowed special care on satvikabhinaya. To put it in a nutshell, Bharata advocated thematic coherence with an eye on emotional unity. Bharata advised his co-actors: ‘See, this is the seed. There is life in it, inherent and invisible. Breed a tree in myriad forms out of this’. He prescribed three basic canons for them to follow – worldly habits, the science of acting and one’s own inner-self<sup>3</sup>. When he said loka, Bharata fully knew that loka never is static nor mono-centric or mono-cultural. He envisioned a dynamic theatre which always responds to the needs of the milieu.

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<sup>1</sup> The first play which I saw of Kavalam, was Daivathar in 1974. It was the interpretation of a primordial myth. I saw his Sakuntalam in 1983 in the Natyagrha of Kerala Kalamandalam. The first presentation on that day was Mattavilasa by our students. There were many eminent Natyasastra scholars in the packed auditorium. They were critical about the second production. Their derisive comment was that ‘this is Kavalam’s Sakuntala, not of Kalidasa’. First I was puzzled; later I realised that the textual coaching of Natyasastra which I give to my students alone will not be sufficient to explain the contemporary realities. Slowly, it came to me that Natyasastra is not the six thousand verses; but also two thousand years added to that. It is a text; also a tradition. This paper partially fulfils my enquiry in that direction.

<sup>2</sup> Kavalam Narayana Panikkar is a poet, lyricist, playwright and director who is active in the field for the last five decades. He has written and directed more than fifty plays in Sanskrit, Hindi and Malayalam. All his productions engage in constant dialogue with classical and regional traditions. For more details: Theatre of Roots, Erin.B.Mee, Seagull, 2007; K N Panikkar: The Theatre of Rasa, Ed. Udayan Vajpeyi, Niyogi Books, New Delhi, 2012

<sup>3</sup> Loko vidya tadadhyatmam. Natyasastra

## 1. Tradition

It has become necessary now to take a digression to analyse the nature of tradition, which word we will have several occasion to repeat during the course of this discourse.<sup>4</sup> Tradition is a continuum. Ratan Thiyam has a long introduction in his *Chakravyuha*.<sup>5</sup> The sutradhara enters with two *pariparswikas* exactly as prescribed by Bharata. But he does not use them to introduce the play or the author as is customary to *Natyasastra*; instead the sutradhara leads us to the battlefield at Kurukshetra. He shows us all the fighting heroes with muttering flags. This is how one encounters with tradition. The process is two-fold: a return to tradition and a coming out from tradition. Those who do not know the technique to 'come out' are destined to be trapped inside.

Tradition, in other words, is a flow, a river. It starts from some unknown mountain, passes through the fertile soil and absorbs whatever comes on its way. Several streams join from different sources, some deviates to be tributaries and the flow continues without interruption. The water we see at this moment was not there the other day and will not be there in the next day. Still we call them permanent as Ganga, Godavari or Kaveri. This is how tradition encounters the contemporary life. This is true of theatre too.

## 2. Narrative Tradition (9.c - 11. C E)

The *Natyasastra* tradition continued as the fountain-head of the theatrical practices for over a thousand years. Great playwrights like Kalidasa, Sudraka, Visakhadatta, Bhavabhuti and others strictly conformed to the instructions of Bharata. We get numerous references regarding the theatrical practices of this age. Even poetics adopted the tenants of *Natyasastra*. A great breakthrough in the history of Poetics was the introduction of the doctrine of suggestion (*dhvani*) by Anandavardhana in his *Dhvanyaloka* in the ninth century. It opened infinite possibilities to the poets. A contemporary royal dramatist, Kulasekhara of Kerala, was excited over the potential of this novel approach. He aspired to implement the concept of *dhvani* to theatre. He was a *Natyasastra* expert, playwright, director and actor. There were celebrated *Natyasastra* pundits, poets, scientists, actors and Mahabharata scholars in his court. He called them and discussed ways to invigorate the theatre: "We have to find out a new way, different from the conventional, to satisfy the audience. A new theory expounded in Kashmir for poetry, if applied to theatre, will provide enormous chances for improvisation. Let us try the aesthetics of *dhvani* in theatre". He then put on the roles of each character to illustrate the new mode of presentation he had in mind. An elderly scholar of *Natyasastra* recorded them. This performance text is known as *Vyangyavyakhya* – interpreting the implied sense in a dramatic text<sup>6</sup>.

Kulasekhara made two major innovations on Bharata's theatre.

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<sup>4</sup> Dr. U. R. Ananthamurthy, while delivering the Parikshit Memorial Lecture on 'Tradition and Creativity' used a beautiful metaphor - Ramayya's sickle – to explain the concept of tradition. Ramayya is a good gardener. He has a wonderful sickle to cut the plants which he inherited as a family heritage. Long back, the then king pleased with the fabulous flowers his great grandfather brought for his daughter's wedding, presented this amazing gift to him. It passed from generation to generation and now came to Ramayya. After him his son will inherit it. Now, ask Ramayya whether this is the same sickle that the king presented to his grandfather? "No doubt, it is the very same. The studs attached were worn out once, one of my grandfathers brought new studs. The wooden part was replaced by another. The blade lost its sharpness. Then, my father replaced it. There is no doubt that the sickle is the same".

<sup>5</sup> *Chakravyuh*, Ratan Thiyam, Seagull. 1998.

<sup>6</sup> *Vyangyavyakhya: The Aesthetics of Dhvani in Theatre*, Ed. K. G. Paulose, Rashtriya Sanskrit Sansthan, New Delhi and D K Print World, New Delhi, 2013.

**1.2.1** Authors leave many things hidden in their texts. The actor has to discover what is in 'brackets' and share it with the audience. Vidushaka in Subhadradhananjaya, for example, enters the stage asking for alms - Bhikshaa. The feminine gender in Bhikshaa suggests that he is asking for a maiden. Arjuna is in love with Subhadra. But her elder brother has promised her to Duryodhana. They have come to seek her hand. The actor does not have a text to communicate this hidden meaning. He depends on his imagination. Manodharmabhinaya, of which Bharata had given a hint, gets a higher role here. Kulasekhara as a director allows a free hand to his actors. For the first time, actors are liberated from the control of the texts. Talented among the actors indulge for long in imaginative acting. The result is that the rigid text which Bharata built up and guarded so carefully with sandhis and sandhyangas crumbled, fragmented and was lost in the wilderness.<sup>7</sup>

**1.2.2** By the other equally important innovation Kulasekhara transformed the imitative theatre of Bharata to a narrative one. He insisted that every character in his/her first entry should narrate the past events to the present point. This he called Purvasambandha - connecting the past to the present. To make the narration effective the actor will have to transform from his imitated role to multiple other roles. There is an array of transformations in quick succession-actor to the imitated character, again to the actor, then to the reflected characters, again to the actor, so on and so forth. Bharata would have been baffled by these multiple transformations, that too in the costume of the imitated character! This is how one enters into the tradition and gets out of it. The royal dramatist revolutionised the conventional concept of the actor as imitator by conferring on him the two additional functions of narrator (akhyata) and interpreter (vyakhyata). The result, to say the least, was marvellous!

Kulasekhara identified different layers in the audience—the elite (prekshaka) and the ordinary (nanaloka). His innovations were intended for the former. One or two centuries after Kulasekhara, the number of nanaloka increased and they demanded a larger share. Under their pressure, the local language, Malayalam, was introduced to the sophisticated Sanskrit stage. The Vidushaka, who used it, came to occupy the central stage. His wit and criticism attracted more people. He extended a short play to thirty five or forty nights! He revitalised the Sanskrit theatre and it continued to be a living tradition in Kerala in the form of Kutiyattam.<sup>8</sup>

These drastic reforms transformed the Sanskrit stage to a splendid grand narrative. Bharata, anointed, so to say, the puranic Vyasa and offered him ardhāsana (half-seat) in the throne of theatre. Nata, thus, became the incarnation of suta too. The fusion of the epic narration with the dramatic imitation had far-reaching consequences in the thousand years that followed.

### **3. Emergence of Regional Identities (10c. - 19c. CE)**

This development was not confined to Kerala. It was a pan-Indian phenomenon. BY the end of the first millennium regional identities began to emerge all over India. This became evident first in the field of language. Different dialects, grown as prakrts, declared their freedom from Sanskrit and became independent languages. All the North Indian languages developed in this way. The emerging languages adopted a two-way strategy for their development: one, they discarded the domination of Devabhasha and two, while doing so they absorbed all that were there in Sanskrit by way of

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<sup>7</sup> The plays now ascribed to Bhasa were with the actors of Kerala for over eight hundred years; but nobody knew the text or the author.

<sup>8</sup> For more details, see Kutiyattam Theatre: The Earliest Living Tradition, K G Paulose, International Centre for Kutiyattam Tripunithura, 2007. Distribution, New Bharatiya Book Corporation, New Delhi,110002.

translations or adaptations to enrich their new identities. Sanskrit there-after continued its presence, invisibly, in the Indian scenario. The impact of these developments on theatre was seen in the emergence of diverse forms of minor plays (uparupakas) in different parts of the country. They became so innumerable that the authors of the 13-14 centuries struggled hard to count them in their treatises.<sup>9</sup>

As is well - known uparupakas do not follow the rigid structure of the rupakas; they work on a flexible frame. The text will, in many cases, be oral or drawn from memory, dance and music will have a prominent role. Wit and criticism are their integral ingredients, the method is narrative and they have an open ending. There were many regional manifestations in this manner. The Gitagovindam and various bhakti movements encouraged new forms of performance. Scholars have studied the various aspects of the socio-religious movements and cultural networks in India in the four or five centuries that followed the decline of Sanskrit.<sup>10</sup> This was a dynamic period in the history of our theatre. A new form of dance – nrtya - different from Bharata's nrta became popular. The notable achievement of this era was the involvement of the masses who were hitherto kept out of the realm of serious theatre activities. Natya, now, became the real panchama Veda-the Veda of the panchamas (the out-castes) too. Bharata could extend theatre only up to Sudras who were within the boundary of the four varnas (sarvavarnikam).<sup>11</sup>

Before proceeding further two points have to be made clear. Many of our historians attribute foreign intervention as the cause for the decline of Sanskrit. It is true, only partially. The real cause of the decline of Sanskrit after the 10<sup>th</sup> c.CE was the emergence of regional identities. Another equally fallacious notion is about the process of Sanskritisation. In fact, the process was just the reverse. The regional identities were actually localizing the national tradition.

The difference of this pan-Indian localisation from the Kerala experiment is this: the physical presence of Sanskrit and Natyasastra tradition continued in Kerala even after the localisation movement; in other states the national tradition became dormant making its physical presence invisible.

#### **4. Politics of colonial Aesthetics**

19<sup>th</sup> century is another landmark in the history of our theatre. The colonial masters introduced their theatre in the urban centres which influenced the existing theatre-practices. They introduced a new performance culture consisting of - proscenium stage, text-dominated performance and commercialised theatre going.

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<sup>9</sup> Natyasastra and its Regional Manifestations, Radhavallabh Tripathi, Introduction to Vyangyavyakhya. *ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> 'Radha has been a precarious bridge between these two cultures in medieval Bengal. Her image had developed of the boundary of two consciousnesses – the folk and the scholastic. An exploration of the hitherto neglected source of Radha in the folk tradition, therefore, becomes essential for an understanding not only of the Radha image, but also of the popular conception of man-woman relation in Bengal. Excavating oral culture from contemporary literary texts is one of the modes of such exploration.'

Appropriating of a Folk-Heroine Radha in Medieval Bengali Vaishnavite Culture, Sumanta Banerjee, 1993

<sup>11</sup> 'Bharata said that Theatre is sarvavarnika, i.e., for all castes. The cursed descendants of Bharata cannot help exchanging it with all human, gods and demons; notwithstanding the fact that the world today is uneven in much more complicated ways than in those days'. S Shiva Prakash, Theatre Between Cultures in Modern Indian Drama: issues and Interventions, Ed. Lakshmi Subramanyam, 2008

The colonial scholars identified Indian theatre with Sanskrit theatre. None of the pundits who tutored them did tell them of the pluralistic nature of the country. They did not realise that India is a vast country with many languages and innumerable dialects, all with different cultural identities and theatrical practices. In their ignorance they declared that there was a big vacuum in India after the decline of Sanskrit in the tenth century and proudly announced that they are filling that vacuum. By doing so they erased all the theatre activities in the country for nine hundred years (11.c – 19).

#### 1.4.1 The colonial masters had their political agenda in erasing Indian theatrical achievements:

‘The real aim of colonialism was to control the people’s wealth –what they produced, how they produced it, and how it was distributed; to control; in other words, the entire realm of the language of real life. But its most important area of domination was the mental universe of the colonised, to control, through culture, of how people perceived themselves and their relationship to the world. To control a people’s culture is to control their tools of self-definition in relationship to others. For, colonialism involved two aspects of the same process: the destruction or the deliberate undervaluing of a people’s culture, their art, dances, religions, history, geography, education, literature and the domination of a people’s language by the languages of the colonizing nations’.<sup>12</sup>

We are not against the aesthetics of colonial theatre. It has already become part of our tradition. But we are against the colonial politics of theatre. It colonised our minds and taught us that all our theatrical expressions are nothing less than vulgarity.<sup>13</sup>

‘In a sense this unfortunate impression was confirmed by the readiness with which we accepted and have been almost slavishly imitating, the Western models of dramatic writing and theatrical presentation for the last two hundred years. The present brief introduction to Indian theatre is an attempt to question, examine and reject this false assumption, carefully implanted and nurtured by the colonial rulers and blindly accepted by successive generations of our westernised elite’.<sup>14</sup>

1.4.2 The next phase of development of our theatre is known to all. It is the post-independent scenario. The era started with a call for the formation of a national theatre. It was followed by a plea for the search of roots in the seventies. To achieve this we have to undo the erasure of the last two hundred years. We have to seek the continuity of the broken period of two hundred years. It is this that Habib Tanvir did when he went to the rural Chhattisgarh actors to do his theatre. He showed to us that the borderline between the classical and folk are very thin.<sup>15</sup> B V Karanth tried it with Yakshagana. Kavalam, Ratan Thiyam and others continue their search for roots. They realise that this is the only form of resistance against a market-based world –order to protect our cultural identity.

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<sup>12</sup>Kenyan Playwright Nugget wa Thiong, *Colonizing the mind: The politics of language in African Literature.* ! 995, page 58.

<sup>13</sup> Mahakavi Vallathol as part of promotional activities of Kathakali in the thirties of last century travelled to different places and made kathakali performances by his troupe. He had fixed a tour to Burma, then part of British Empire. He received several letters from the Malayalees migrated there. The content of all of them was that the people around now believed that they belonged to a cultured group and if the vulgar dance in the name of Kathakali was brought there others will treat Malayalees as savages. So don’t bring it here. The poet cancelled the Burma trip reluctantly.

<sup>14</sup> Indian Theatre: Continuity and Change, Nemichandra Jain, 1995 p.9-10

<sup>15</sup> Habib Tanvir has produced the following Sanskrit plays: *Mrcchakatikam* as *Mitti Ki Gadi*, 1958; *The Signet Ring*, Translation of *Mudrarakshasa*, 1968; *Uttararamacharitam*, 1977; *Bhagavadajjukakam* 1977; *Duryodhana*, *Bhasa Trilogy*, 1978; *Venisamharam*, 2001.

India is a vast sub continent where one sixth of the people of the world live in 22 states speaking 15 different languages and 1652 recognised dialects. Each of them has its own identity, culture, tradition and theatre. The notions of Indianness and rootedness should be mutually co-existing. India is a garden of many plants and flowers. The fabulous beauty of it lies in the richness of colours and flavours.

## 2

Kerala has made three seminal contributions to the world of theatre in the last century. The first was the discovery of Bhasa Plays in the dawn of the century. M M Ganapati Sastrikal retrieved them from manuscripts in 1908. The second was the introduction, in the sixties, of the Natyasatra mode of acting in the form of Kutiyattam to public stages. By the end of seventies, Kerala presented to the world Sri. Kavalam Narayana Panikkar. None of the three- Bhasa plays, Kutiyattam and Kavalam - can be studied in isolation ; they are inter-related and are complementary to one another.

**2.1** Kavalam Theatre poses a puzzle to many. If Duryodhana (Urubhanga) with the shattered thigh continues to crawl for long on stage, Kavalam will ask his assistant to call a taxi to admit him in a hospital. That is his concept of truth and reality on stage! He learned this first lesson from the great poet Vallathol in his early young days. Kavalam was staging a realistic play, Atom Bomb by name, to which he invited the great poet who was then on a visit to his village. After watching the two-hour production patiently, the cryptic comment of the poet was – ‘This you could have written in less than half a page’. This reaction was his first shock, say, aesthetic shock. Never thereafter did he put his hand on naturalistic productions! Hence his initiation to theatre was not through drama, but through dramatic poetry, as Ayyappa Panikkar liked to call it.<sup>16</sup> The aesthetics of it was not much different from that of lyrical poetry. Lyric is also enjoyed after visualisation. To enjoy Kumarasmbhava, one must first see the Himalayas, Parvati, Siva all in the mind’s eye. As Abhinavagupta puts it - Kavyepi natyayamane eva rasah. Poetry is not natya, but it is relished only when it is transformed into concrete visual forms, when it acquires the state of natya. The difference between sravyakavya and drsyakavya is this – the former presents linguistic images; theatre transforms them to visual images with the help of acting, music and percussions. Theatre is an ensemble of all these. The seventh century critic Vamanacharya illustrates this with a metaphor of a variegated cloth as against a plain one. This confluence of various elements make theatre the highest form of poetry.

## 2.2 Aesthetics of Kavalam

The evolution of Indian theatre over two thousand years was traced in some detail to explain the aesthetics of visual poetry in different periods and to fix Kavalam in a historical context. Kavalam inherits this great tradition and his theatre is a confluence of all these elements. He follows Natyasastra in his format, he joins hands with Kulasekhara in formulating sub-texts, and is comfortable with the folk in their narratives. In his Malayalam plays he de-codes the mysteries of rural myths and archetypes. Bharata formulates the frame for Kavalam plays. They preserve the nandi, sutradhara and bharatavyakhya. The technique of natyadharmi is exploited to the maximum. He is not sympathetic with lokadharmi, though he uses it occasionally. Mudras are accepted, but he mixes them with worldly gestures to make them more intelligible. He knows well the dictum of

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<sup>16</sup> Kavalam’s first composition was Sakshi (1964) in Malayalam. It was directed by Sri. Kumaravarma. It was more or less a lyrical drama.

Bharata that 'sayya hi natyasya vadanti geetam'. He cushions any gaps or blocks with music, melody and rhythm. His style is narrative for which he is indebted to the Kerala tradition. His actors transform to the imitated, turn back to the selves, and pass with ease to multiple roles. If not watched carefully, one will fail to distinguish these many incarnations of nata, because, the transformations occur at quick succession. To crown all these accomplishments, his interpretative genius and directorial abilities make the ancient themes most contemporary and relevant to the context. For Kavalam, theatre itself is activism and he delves on it by re-contextualising the classical texts of a by-gone era.<sup>17</sup>

**2.3** The secret of the success of his theatre lies in its ability to harmonise the padartha-vakyartha mode of acting with the sanchari-sthayi complex to form dynamic visual images. While presenting Ghatotkacha in Madhyamavyayoga the actor will elaborate each word with the required emotional stress and expression- simhasyah (the lion-faced), simhadamstrah (leonine teeth), Madhunibhanayanah (honey- red-eyed) etc. These are qualities which he inherited from his mother, and hence demonic. The qualities acquired from father are of human in nature – vyudhorah (broad in chest), Vajramadhyah (tight in waist) etc. All these word- meanings are well-enacted separately. This is padardhabhinaya. They express different transient moods. At the end we get a total meaning which stimulates the veerarasa. All the transient moods expressed through the individual word-acting submerge into the total meaning of vakyartha and brings out the rasa. This convergence of different elements make the presentation attractive. He creates a gallery of visual images as in the chitrapata of Bhavabhuti (in the first Act of Uttararamacharita) to share and transmit the intense emotions portrayed on stage.

**2.4** His technique of extraction deserves special mention here. According to the tradition in Kerala, only one Act of a play is presented during one night. Thus it requires six or seven days to present a play in full. But Kavalam does not present a text as it is. He extracts the essence of the plot in his own way and prepares a performance text of his own limiting to less than two hours for the performance. He does not have any pretention that he is faithful to the text, not even to his own scripts. But he makes it a point to do justice to the source-text even when he gives different interpretations. He chooses only those he considers essential to create visual images and sub-texts. This he learned from Kutiyattam and Kathakali. Of the hundreds of lines or verses in the source-text, Kutiyattam selects only a few which the actor thinks that he can translate into concrete forms. Kathakali actors also do the same thing. This technique is employed in all his productions like Malavikagnimitra, Sakuntala etc.

But he reverses this process when he comes to the Mahabharata plays of Bhasa. They are crisp and require elaboration. Take Karnabhara for example. The play starts with the benediction. Karna enters. He is in a melancholy mood. He is drawn to opposite directions –conflict of his own identity as to whether he is Radheya or Kauntheya. Then enters Kunti to reveal the terrible truth of his birth. This is not in Bhasa. Kavalam takes the verses from Mahabharata in this context. The next scene is the story of Parasurama. Here by a clever dramatic device the director has made Salya and Parasurama the same, thereby reminding us that this is a recall of Karna of his memory. Now the conflict between two fathers over their sons is visually presented. Surya enters to bless his son. Vedic hymns

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<sup>17</sup> Sanskrit plays produced by Kavalam: Bhagavadajjukam in Malayalam, 1976; Madhyamavyayoga, 1978; Dootavakyam, 1980; Sakunthala, 1982; Vikramorvaseeyam, 1982; Mattavilasam in Hindi, 1984; Karnabharam, 1984; Urubhangam in Hindi 1983, in Sanskrit, 1987; Svapnavasavadattam, 1993; Pratima, 1999; Charudattam, 2002; Mayasitankam of Ascharyachoodamani, 2005; Malavikagnimitram, 2006 and Uttararamacharitam in Hindi, 2010. These productions prove that we live in the golden age of Sanskrit theatre.



(Adityastuti) are used to present the Sun. Indra enters to safeguard the interests of his son Arjuna. Here also hymns (Indrastuti) are invoked. The role of Indra is as one who cheats deliberately Karna to save Arjuna. Indra sends the Vajramukha to disturb Karna ; the Brahmin who takes away Karna's earrings is also Indra in disguise. The play ends with the sloka Poornamada, declaring that Karna is full even after he is deprived of those valuable attributes. Karnabhara is the one play where Kavalam has made many additions. All go to proclaim the greatness of Karna in the midst of many odds. The humiliation which Karna had to swallow and the manner in which he becomes a victim of cheating even by the gods is well depicted in this production.

**2.5** Among the six Mahabharata plays of Bhasa, the text in Madhyama is not strong as in Karnabhara or in Urubhanga. But Kavalam made it memorable. He transformed the plot to tender familial love. There are two families – Brahmin's family consists of wife and three children; the other - father, mother and son. The contrast is clear. Yet the bond between the members of both is the same. The designation of Bhima as Madhyama brings into memory another family where he too is a son. To be in between means that you are not on the list of the two, either in family or, say, in politics. Helplessness borne out of the middle-ness of an innocent child is the focus of the play. Luckily, he is saved. But the irony of the situation is that the saviour himself is a madhyama! Familial love cannot be visualised more beautifully. Kavalam has done it to the envy of Bhasa himself. It may also be noted here that Bhasa is the only dramatist in Sanskrit who is favourably inclined to subaltern characters. He has created two plays for them –Madhyamavyayoga and Dutaghatotkacha. Both are Bhasa's own inventions to show these characters in good light. In the latter Ghatotkacha proclaims that the demons living in the wild forests are far higher in morals than the human beings! Hidumba is a loving and dutiful wife forgetting the fact that Bhima had deserted her. The son also is an ideal character. Bhasa's care and sympathy for those who are marginalised are the hall-marks of these two plays. Kavalam following Bhasa has presented the caring mother and loving son well.

Kavalam creates images and interprets them in the most dramatic way. Take for example the elephant in Avimaraka. A group of six actors create the elephant. According to the text the elephant attacks Kurangi, the heroine. But Kavalam's elephant is friendly with her. More than that, the elephant according to Kavalam is Avimaraka himself. Hence instead of horrifying her it takes her soothingly by the tusk and gives her a gentle swing! Similarly, in Sakunthala a deer appears first and transforms itself into Sakuntala. The term mrgayavihari cannot be interpreted more poignantly. In Urubhanga, Bhasa uses two images to portray Duryodhana –one of a child crawling on the ground and the other of vasuki left out after the churning. The first explains the concept of Suyodhana and the second the futility of war. The interpretative genius of Kavalam is at his best in Malavikagnimitra. This maiden work of Kalidasa is not a great one from the theatrical point of view. But Kavalam has made it one of his best productions. This he did by interpreting a metaphor of Kalidasa. The Asoka tree in the garden is dry and barren. The queen Dharini promises Mavika that her desire will be fulfilled if the tree flowers by the touch of her feet. She does it and Asoka flowers and she is allowed to join Agnimitra. Taking this rather insignificant incident in the text of the play he developed it into a full play. The metaphor is that of kusumitasoka and tapaniyasoka, the former symbolising prosperity and the latter poverty.

**2.6** Kavalam restricts the use of vachika. There was a time when theatre was logo-centric. He transforms verbal renderings to creative images that evoke emotion. This is evident more in Uttararamacharita. Udayan Vajpeye has reconstructed the play in an exciting manner. Both Kavalam and Udayan are poets and, as one can expect, they have extracted the essence to create a lovely poetic lyric from the mass of the long play. The performance starts with a wonderful celebration



expressing the descent of divine poetry to human tongue. Valmiki enters. Prattle of birds everywhere. Suddenly a hunter shoots his arrow. One of the couple falls down. An outburst from the sage -'ma nishada'. There is a different interpretation for Ma nishada in Kerala, according to which nishada is the embodiment of the scandal. Valmiki writes the real story of Sita to ward off the charge against her. Kavalam has not tried to exploit the potential of this interpretation. Instead he takes it to express the jubilation over the birth of poetry.

Rama enters. He suffers from an inner conflict –how to leave Sita? how to live with her? It continues until he decides to send her out to the forest on the words of Durmukha. Only the washer man raises a doubt about her character. The people had full faith in her purity. Yet Rama did the cruel thing. Vasanti, in the forest pesters him on this issue. He is unmoved. The horse for Asvamedha, Sita's golden image in the sacrifice, use of Jrubhakastra by Lava – all are referred to. The play ends with the inner-drama. It began with the antar-dvandva of Rama and ended with the antar-natya!

The question naturally arises-Why did Kavalam presented Rama in a melancholic mood even before he hears the scandal from the spy? He has done this with Karna too. But Karna is aware of everything from the beginning. Here in lies the beauty of this presentation. Kavalam is not presenting a character; instead he is raising a serious question-whether the beloved and people can co-exist in a monarch? Whether the personal life and royal responsibilities can go hand in hand without encroaching one another? It is significant that he does not respond in the positive. He leaves the question open and hopes in the Bharatavyakhya that they may. The director is quite right. None in the given situation can say otherwise. We had great models in the last generation who upheld the dignity of public life over personal gains. It is a vanishing group. One can only hope for the better.

Of all his Sanskrit productions, I would, given a choice, pick up two to be the best- Malavikagnimitra and Uttararamacharita. Both are poetic. The former tells us, through a metaphor, that good governance sprigs prosperity for one and all. The second leaves a question open. We have to find out the answer. That is its relevance.<sup>18</sup>

### 3. Conclusion

The theatre of roots has been criticized by some as anti-modern. These critics see the directors taking the dip in the river but pretend not to have seen them coming out to the banks. A more sophisticated way of foregrounding the same argument is that their theatre is spectacular and exhilarating, but lacks in content. The predicament to which the older generation has led the youth of India cannot be better expressed than it is done in chakravayuh. The doubt of the trapped youth - Am I a scapegoat or martyr? – is a shock and warning to those who make them scape-goats for personal gains and later celebrate them as martyrs. Both the uncles, Dharmaputra and Bhima knew well that Abhimanyu does not know how to come out; Yet they encouraged the innocent boy because they were not the fathers and the real father was out of reach. The irony is that Bhima realised it soon when Krishna made Ghatotkacha another scapegoat in a few days. There was no one to weep, let alone to declare a mourning! A sinning generation cannot be exposed in a better way. Theatre, for them, is a search for identity as also a tool to criticize the evils in the society.

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<sup>18</sup> "Stage-rendering of a dramatic text always demands a fresh creative thinking and an imaginative re-creative process of story-telling....Why a sub-text? The necessity for a sub-text is felt on the basis that the text can and has to convey more than what it is in its performance. It is not as straight as a factual statement or a brass track phenomenon. In other words, it is not without dhvani, the basic and lively component of good literature".  
K N Panikkar in, Introduction to Rangasaptak, Chauhan Promod, Rajakamal Prakasan, New Delhi, 2013.

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